

Teaching in Postsecondary Institutions: An Interview with Dr. Wilbert McKeachie

By Russ Hodges and Christie L. Hand

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Wilbert J. McKeachie is Professor Emeritus of Psychology and former Director of the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan where he has spent his entire professional career since obtaining his doctorate in 1949. In more than 30 books and monographs, 120 chapters, 200 journal and professional articles, and 500 scientific and professional presentations and workshops, he has left a legacy of immense proportions to the fields of psychology and education. Perhaps he is best known for Teaching Tips, Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers (2002, 11th ed., Houghton Mifflin).



Dr. McKeachie is Past President of the American Psychological Association; the American Association of Higher Education; the American Psychological Foundation; the Division of Educational, Instructional, and School Psychology of the International Association of Applied Psychology; and the Center for Social Gerontology. He is also Past Chairman of the Committee on Teaching, Research, and Publication of the American Association of University Professors and of Division J (Psychology) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He has been a member of the National Institute of Mental Health Council, the Veterans' Association Special Medical Advisory Group, and various other government advisory committees on mental health, behavioral and biological research, and graduate training.

Among other honors, he has received eight honorary degrees and the American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal for Lifetime Contributions to Psychology. Most recently, the College Reading and Learning Association, during their 2004 annual conference, honored him with a Lifetime Honorary Membership for his contributions to the practice and research of college teaching, the training of college teachers, and the study of human learning at the college level.

Russ Hodges (R.H.): You began teaching psychology in 1946 at the University of Michi-

gan. Since then, your career has spanned many milestones of recent American higher education history. For example, in the 1940s and 50s the GI Bill gave millions of former veterans access to college. These veterans represented a new type of college student. What was most memorable to you in the field of education during that time period in our history?

Wilbert McKeachie (W.M.): Veterans were more mature students; they were highly motivated. A lot of them wouldn't have had an opportunity without the GI bill. My best friend in high school was a farm boy. He went back to the farm after high school and was drafted into the war. After the war, he went to Kalamazoo College on the GI Bill, then went to seminary, became a Baptist preacher, and had a fine career. The bill made a big difference in people's lives. In fact, when our girls were small, I told Ginny [my wife], "We don't need to save for college; the GI bill has been so successful that we'll have free public education through grade 16 by the time they're in college." Unfortunately, Republicans don't like to pay taxes.

Christie Hand (C.H.): In the 1950s and 60s, community colleges spread across the country, making it possible for state universities to set higher admission standards. Did the University of Michigan follow this trend? What changes did you see as a result of these higher admission standards?

W. M.: Well, it didn't affect us, but it did impact other institutions.. Ohio State and Michigan State (our two rivals in football!), for example, both had essentially open admission. Any high school graduate could go to the university. They spent the first year weeding out people. They had the notion that only certain people were competent to go to college. I can remember arguing about this at the American Council of Education and other groups which I was in at the time. Now, we think everyone can learn and we can teach them. But at that time, there was a feeling that only a certain percentage of people could profit from college. The first year, you were supposed to weed out those who couldn't be

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college students. It created a terrible atmosphere for the first-year students. But Michigan has always had selective admissions, so changes in admission standards didn't affect us much.

R.H.: From the 1960s through the 80s, the trend in college admission was toward promoting access to underrepresented populations of students. In fact, by 1970 one-half million students (one-seventh of those enrolled in U.S. colleges) came from low socio-economic backgrounds. How did colleges and, in particular, college instructors adapt to the challenges of teaching these new populations of students?

W.M.: Some didn't! A lot of people just kept giving the same old lectures. I think at Michigan, we did better. Actually, we had recruited black graduate students. When I was chair of graduate studies for our department, one of my colleagues, who later became the chair, was very invested in doing something for African-American students. The university had set up a sister relationship with Tuskegee, a traditionally black institution, and we had faculty exchanges with them. So we were recruiting black graduate students even then. One of my first teachers at Michigan was also black.

One of our early Black Ph.D. students, Nick Collins, went to Cornell to direct their study skills center. He was later brought back to Michigan and established what is called the Comprehensive Studies Program, which is still going on and is very successful. One of the key parts is a summer bridge program. Minority and low-income students or students from poor educational backgrounds (not necessarily minority, but most were) are invited to come the summer before they enroll as freshmen and are given courses in math, English, and reading. The center also provides tutorial services during the year. This has helped a lot in our retention of minority students. Nick and I taught a course in Learning Strategies which he still teaches for his students.

C.H.: In 1991, you participated in an interview conducted by Jane Halonen for the volume *Teaching Psychology in America: A History*. You mentioned in this interview that the students of the 90s were much more grade- and task-oriented than the idealistic students of past decades. How do we, as educators, encourage students to want more than just good grades and to learn for the personal satisfaction of learning?

W.M.: That's a continuing problem. You can't expect people not to be concerned about grades. One of our more recent studies showed that the students who were too grade-

oriented don't do as well as those who are moderately grade-oriented but are more intrinsically-oriented. Basically, people like challenges that they can meet. One of the items on student rating forms that relates highly to teacher overall effectiveness is "the course was challenging." People think the way to get good student ratings is to have an easy course. That's not true. Students prefer and give higher ratings to courses that are difficult, if they're within reason. On the other hand, you can make the course so difficult that nobody can get it. Sometimes poor teachers justify the fact that the students don't like them by saying, "They couldn't meet my standards."

R.H.: One age-old question that I would like to pose relates to the real purpose of undergraduate postsecondary education, especially for today's students. In your opinion, should it consist of general education, leaving specialization to graduate and professional education programs? Or should undergraduate

Everybody hired people for their research, not for their teaching.

education share the general undergraduate curriculum with specialized, career education?

W.M.: I think some of both. General education is basic. It provides a framework, not just for their courses, but for life-long learning and living. Traditional liberal education is also more transferable to new situations. With a rapidly changing culture, students need that kind of foundation—particularly an interest in continued learning—if they are going to cope successfully with the changes that occur in society. On the other hand, it's realistic that people have to get jobs.

Not everybody is going on to graduate school, so they need to get some things that are more oriented toward practical, potentially sellable skills. One of my friends was director of personnel for General Motors and he said the thing they were looking for most was the ability to work cooperatively with other people. It used to be that their designer would design something, and the engineer wouldn't be able to produce. Now we have learned that workers have to talk to one another from the beginning of the creation of a new model and work cooperatively. So, I use a lot of team learning and group process activities in my classes, and I try to tell the students that it's not just effective for learning psychology. Learning to work effectively with other groups is one of the most basic skills for getting along

in society, one that's particularly relevant for jobs.

C.H.: Over the years, you have been a proponent of teaching cognitive and critical thinking skills to undergraduate students. For example, in 1982, you bridged the gap between psychology and education and created a learning-to-learn course for freshman at the University of Michigan. How is this course different from a traditional developmental study skills course?

W.M.: When I first proposed this course, it was because cognitive psychology was becoming popular and it seemed that it could be useful to students. My own department said, "You can't teach that to freshmen; Cognitive Psychology is an advanced course!" I tried to convince them that I could do it: "Give me a chance at least to see if I can teach them!" Then I presented the course to the college curriculum committee and they said, "This is just a study skills course; we don't give credit for study skills courses!" I said, "Well, look, I'm using a text that's ordinarily used for junior and senior classes and it's not just the SQ3R method, a recipe to use without thinking." I used to teach this method before cognitive psychology, and students knew how to do it. But then I'd ask them after an exam how many had used it for preparing for the exam, and they hadn't used it. Cognitive psychology showed us that rather than simply rewarding students for the right answers we needed to get them to think about the relationship between concepts—to link new knowledge to what was already in their heads. If they understand why things work, they're more likely to use and adapt them than if you just have them do it without any explanation. I think the course was successful, and it's still going on.

R.H.: You probably have completed some studies on the effect the course has had on students' retention and graduation rates.

W.M.: Yes, we did do a 4-year follow-up study, and the course had a positive effect. You can't really do a randomized controlled study, so what I did was simply compare students who took the course with those with comparable SATs who didn't take the course. Maybe the ones who took the course were more motivated. It might not have been the course that produced better effects; at least the results were in the right direction.

C.H.: Throughout the years you have mentored many well-known scholars such as Claire Ellen Weinstein, Diane Halpern, and Barry Zimmerman.

W.M.: I learned as much from them as they learned from me.

C.M.: Was there a particular teacher or mentor who influenced your love of learning in your elementary or secondary education, and how was that influence manifested?

W.M.: That was my father. He taught in a one-room country school, and I was his student for my first 8 years of education. I think he was a very good teacher. I was the only boy in my class along with five girls. We all did pretty well in high school, and at that time not everyone went on to high school. If you completed the eighth grade, you were ready to go out and work on the farm.

R.H.: Your seminal book, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, was first published in 1951 and is now in its 11th edition. What prompted you to write this book, and how has the book evolved over the years, making it more applicable to the new challenges facing educators?

W.M.: I don't know; I hope it's more applicable! In those days we didn't have copy machines or computers; we had a mimeograph which duplicated materials. After my first year or two of running the introductory psychology courses, I discovered that my teaching assistants (TAs) were having some of the same problems as earlier TAs had had. I thought I would just mimeograph some notes so they would know how to handle these problems before they encountered them. I mimeographed these "tips" for them. Then they'd go out and teach in other universities and they'd write back for copies of the "teaching tips." So I published the book myself with a local printing firm in Ann Arbor, and it was distributed through a local bookstore. I charged one dollar a copy and the bookstore got 75 cents. With the first edition, there were 100 copies, the next maybe 500, then 1000, and it's been going ever since.

R.H.: I actually heard that you won't accept royalties.

W.M.: No, I do accept them. I just give the royalties to the university. Part of the royalties help support my research by going into a research fund, and part help support the department and other parts of the university. I figured I wouldn't have those royalties unless I'd been teaching at the University of Michigan and had these opportunities.

In a way, my whole career has been out of the mainstream. When I was finishing my Ph.D., I went in to talk to the department chair about getting a job someplace. I did get job offers from Northwestern and Yale. I guess this is the difference in the job market between

then and today. The chair said, "Pick any university you want. I'll get you a job there." It was 1948; the GIs were flooding in and everybody needed faculty. A couple of weeks later he called and said, "How would you like to stay here for a couple of years and run our introductory course training the graduate students in teaching?" There wasn't a job like that anywhere else. Everybody hired people for their research, not for their teaching. Now, many graduate departments recognize that training graduate students to teach not only improves teaching but develops skills that are useful in life in general. From a pragmatic point of view, it probably wasn't a wise decision to take a job like this. But since I was the only one doing that kind of thing, I quickly became known as the expert on teaching.

R.H.: And to this day, you are *the* expert.

W.M.: Oh, I don't know. There are really a lot of good books on teaching now. But when *Teaching Tips* started, there wasn't anything else like that.

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C.H.: How have you gone about deciding when to publish a new edition?

W.M.: Actually, with the first few editions, it was just when they ran out of copies! When Houghton-Mifflin took over, they initiated regular revisions. Even before the new edition comes out, I have manila folders for each chapter with additions and changes. One of the problems is I try to keep the book small enough to fit in a purse or jacket pocket. Whenever I add something, I have to take out something. I remember when I took out the chapter about the college classroom based on Dick Mann's research, I went to another university and they said, "You got rid of the best chapter in the book!"

R.H.: This is a difficult question to ask. Dr. Paul Pintrich was a distinguished scholar and one of your colleagues in the field of Educational Psychology at the University of Michigan. His untimely death in July, 2003, came as a great loss to all of us. We know that you were particularly close to him, and you collaborated on various research efforts. What

would you say was Paul's most significant contribution to the field of developmental education?

W.M.: He went well beyond me. He was originally my mentee. His death was a shame; he was coming into the peak of his career. His picture was on posters we had up for an upcoming symposium in his honor; it brought tears to my eyes the day I walked by the poster. One thing he did was to integrate motivation and action into what we call self-regulation. In the original version of the Motivation and Strategies for Learning questionnaire, we had metacognitive strategies. Some of those are what would be involved in self-regulation. Paul was the one who developed this line of work. One of his students, Barbara Hofer, has been working with epistemology, students' beliefs about learning. He would see this as bringing together cognition, motivation, and affect along with action; in effect, integrating a number of traditional areas of psychology.

C.H.: What do you see as the future challenges of developmental education in the United States? What are the opportunities?

W.M.: The biggest challenge is getting people to pay enough taxes to support it! Almost every university is having financial problems. Even our community colleges are having trouble. They used to be available to everybody. To do a good job, you really need to have smaller classes. Students need to feel that the teacher cares about them as individuals and is concerned about their learning. The big problem is financial support for education, not just higher education but in inner city schools and education generally.

Everybody is capable of learning. We now know that learning is a natural characteristic of human beings. Maybe if you have a severe brain injury, there's a limit, but even that looks much more hopeful than it used to. We should be giving a lot more people a college education because the future of our country depends on getting more intelligent people in the White House and other places. We need to do a better job of education than we do now, and we need to make sure that newer research and theories get put into practice and used effectively. ☺



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